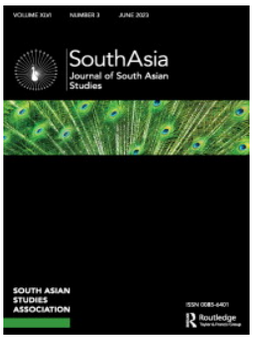

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Muslim Household, Nation and Urdu in Television Dramas of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the genealogies of Muslim cultural and Urdu language reform in late nineteenth century colonial India and traces its post-colonial trajectories in contemporary public culture in Pakistan. It does so by analysing the language and gender politics of Urdu in two Pakistani TV dramas, *Aangan Terha* (*Crooked Courtyard*), written by Anwar Maqsood and screened on the government-run Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) channel in 1984, and *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah* (*The Widow of Mr. Quddusi*), scripted by Faseeh Bari Khan, which was telecast on ARY Digital, a global private satellite channel, in 2012. The article emphasises the gendered language and performative politics of Urdu and respectability in colonial and post-colonial South Asia.

KEYWORDS

Camp; gender; Pakistan; sexuality; television drama; Urdu

Introduction

How do we study public culture in a nation that has been under long years of military dictatorship and an insistence on national culture formed around Islam? What are the sites and archives of public culture when an open, democratic, communicative public sphere is censored? This article aims to look at the contradictions and possibilities of studying public culture in Pakistan, where ideas about nation and culture were arguably imagined around the discourse of a religious community for the secular interests of the Muslim elite in the 1940s and reimagined from the 1980s on.[1] Moving beyond the focus on religion and state, this article argues that questions of national and public culture are often debated within the symbolic language and space of the family and household. This is because the private household space affectively, if not effectively, accommodates the contradictory moral and emotional economy of public anxieties and personal experiences of Islam, national culture and citizenship.[2] This article traces these anxieties conjoined with pleasures and teases out possibilities for the privacy of the household to serve as a site of public culture debates around language, gender and Muslim identity by looking at

CONTACT Razak Khan razak.khan@cemis.uni-goettingen.de

1. Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
2. Gail Minault, ed., *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Chanakya Publication, 1984).

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two moments of staging contradictions and resolutions in the history of Pakistani Urdu television dramas.[3]

Despite the centrality of television as a symbol of both information and entertainment, and TV dramas as an important archive of cultural history, historians of South Asia have not paid adequate attention to the study of television dramas.[4] Television has been studied largely under the broader Screen Studies framework. Feminist and Gender Studies scholars have taken the lead and paid attention to the gendered politics and social impact of television content, but we still lack historical engagement with the televisual archive. The subversive quality of TV as it occupies the central space in the South Asian household has not been adequately studied. The genre of TV drama in particular provides a rich affective archive of what one may call 'dramatic histories', which allow us to situate and rethink questions about the history of production and consumption of drama in South Asia.

This article recognises and draws from the longer tradition of Urdu stage and radio dramas.[5] It also brings Urdu language and literature scholarship in conversation with Women, Gender, Performance, Media and Screen Studies scholarship that have taken the lead in the study of television drama writing, production and consumption.[6] The article highlights the need to study the medium of TV as a multi-sensorial affective archive of the performance of ideology, emotions and experience that creates both reactionary and potentially subversive spaces within South Asian households. This may indeed reveal not only insights about televisual studies but also offer new answers to larger questions about nationalism, citizenship and cultural production and consumption.[7]

Camp Urdu: Vocal masquerade and verbal duelling in television dramas

Television dramas provide a rich affective archive for the study of the moral and emotional economy of the nation-state and citizenship. As Lila Abu-Lughod showed through her insightful work on Egyptian television dramas, they also serve as 'the context over the place of Islam in social and political life'.[8] In this article, I want to extend and complicate this argument by looking at TV dramas and the creation of public culture in the impermissible times of political and cultural censorship. I also want to add that such a critique articulated in Pakistan is not the outcome of reformist middle-class Urdu progressive tradition, but of the unreformed subaltern tradition of the Urdu language.[9] I explore the language and gender politics of Urdu TV dramas to understand the nature of a specific crisis in 'masculine' religious nationalism that is often resolved through a comedic representation of 'emasculation', symbolised by a household populated by women and other

3. Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, 'Why Public Culture?', *Public Culture* 1, no. 1 (1988): 5–9.
4. Salma Siddique, ed., 'Televisual Pakistan', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 1–6.
5. Sajjad Zaheer, 'Urdu Drama', *Indian Literature* 1, no. 2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1958): 139–44.
6. Muneera Cheema, *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan: Gender, Islam and National Identity in Pakistan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).
7. T.W. Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* 8, no. 3 (1954): 213–35.
8. Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Finding a Place for Islam: Egyptian Television Serials and the National Interest', *Public Culture* 5, no. 3 (1993): 493–513; 493.
9. Carlo Coppolo, *Urdu Poetry 1935–1970: The Progressive Episode* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

disenfranchised queer subjects.[10] Here, women and queer subjects operate not as an aberration, but precisely the conduits through which questions of national culture and citizenship can be raised, contested and contained, and a possible counter-public culture that challenges the hegemonic discourse imagined. Therefore, the article pays particular attention to the inherent pliability of the Urdu language and the public culture created by minority, Urdu-speaking migrants (muhajirs) in a multilingual but English-speaking upper class-dominated feudal culture in Pakistan.[11]

Urdu is often referred to as a camp language, with its origins in mixed military camps and markets.[12] During the Hindi-Urdu language controversy of the late nineteenth century, Urdu was also represented as a promiscuous language, embodied in the figure of the courtesan, against Hindi, which was redefined as the morally and emotionally restrained, chaste, domestic woman.[13] Languages were not only defined in gendered but also, more crucially, in the moral and emotional registers of excess and restraint. Prejudiced as it may seem, this association has lasted, especially in the Bombay courtesan film genre.[14] It might be worthwhile to explore this enduring association of Urdu as the emotional language of 'excess' being the chief reason for its persistence in popular culture. The military camp theory of Urdu origins may not be accurate, but it is important to acknowledge its hybrid subaltern roots and not just its royal fort genealogy in Mughal Delhi.[15] It seems to me that the Urdu language is camp in another way: through its (frequently condemned) exaggerated, ornate, gender-fluid words with plural meanings, humour and irony that exemplify what Susan Sontag calls the 'essence of camp', a sensibility that is rooted in a 'love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration'.[16] This excess draws both from the language's aristocratic and, what is more pertinent to my argument here, subaltern pasts.[17] There already exists rich historiography on Urdu as the language of the state, religion and print public sphere, poetry and films.

In this article, I trace and highlight the camp sensibility of Urdu in television dramas not just in 'transvestic words' (Rekhti), 'women's language' (Begumati Zaban) and 'transgender language' (Hijra Farsi) but also in the persistent rhetoric of the reformist Urdu in the contemporary public culture of Pakistan.[18] Indeed, I want to suggest in this article that Urdu, even as a reformed language, remains 'unreformed', and perhaps in this very failure lies its success in shaping contemporary public culture in South Asia. The eclectic blend of gender-bending verbal styles, vocal

10. Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Sovereign Attachments: Masculinity, Muslimness and Affective Politics in Pakistan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).
11. Sadia Toor, *State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011).
12. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).
13. Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).
14. Mukul Kesavan, 'Urdu, Avadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema', in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State*, ed. Zoya Hasan (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994).
15. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).
16. Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 515–30.
17. Carla Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).
18. C.M. Naim, 'Transvestic Words? The *Rekhti* in Urdu', *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16 (2001): 1–25; Ruth Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780–1870* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Gail Minault, 'Begumati Zaban: Women's Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi', *India International Centre Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1984): 155–70.

masquerade, high and low hybrid registers, tangy and spicy vocabulary and risqué wordplay gives Urdu a sensibility much vaster than its literary-historical description as the language of Muslims and of cultural refinement, and which may be better conceptualised as the popular and cosmopolitan cultural artefacts of minority communities. Moving beyond the framework of state and elite usage of Urdu for religious mobilisation and social reform, this article approaches the popular 'unreformed histories' of Urdu, particularly through wit, humour, satire and camp tradition.[19] I argue that this camp dimension of Urdu cannot be measured through its limited reading as elite refinement of language in poetry, religion and statecraft but through its hybrid popular nature, especially its subaltern vocabulary. We can understand this sensibility through Susan Sontag's notion of 'camp'. But unlike Sontag, who situates camp sensibility within white aristocratic dandy and middle-class urbane male queer culture, I want to emphasise the subaltern lower class, caste and feminine roots of Urdu's camp sensibility in South Asia. Women and Gender Studies scholars have studied the historical emergence and marginalisation of this subversive dimension of Urdu in Rekhti, Begumati Zaban and Hijra Farsi in colonial India. However, this article studies the trajectories and persistence of these registers in the televisual culture of Urdu dramas in contemporary Pakistan to think about the connection between politics, pleasure and language. The study of Urdu public culture must begin with home—the old private arena of language, gender and culture warfare in South Asia.

Who is a sharif*? Urdu/muhajir/Pakistani*

In his memorable historical reconstruction of growing up as a middle-class Muslim (*sharif*) in the nineteenth century, David Lelyveld mapped the cultural significance of the space of the courtyard house and milieu on gendered markings: separate but connected, the female (*zenana*) and male (*mardana*) spaces of Muslim middle-class culture co-constituted the household.[20] As Faisal Devji points out, this gendered politics of space was based on reliance and yet mistrust of the female and feminine on raising youth before they could be transported to the public milieu of the university or the employment arena.[21] However, such an ideal condition itself was undermined by the logic of the colonial political economy, which destabilised the traditional Muslim household and created the rise of salary-based ideas about respectable behaviour and respectability (*sharafat*) that were consanguineous with Muslim religious, educational and resultant social-cultural reformist thought after the 1857 revolt. This created what Hamza Alavi insightfully calls a salariat class with political and cultural effects on not just colonial India but also post-colonial Pakistan.[22] The salariat class had its contradiction and displayed it in its championing the cause of modern education for

19. Mushirul Hasan, *Wit and Humour in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2007).
20. David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).
21. Faisal f. Devji, 'Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women's Reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 141–53.
22. Hamza Alavi, 'Politics of Ethnicity in India and Pakistan', in *Sociology of 'Developing Societies': South Asia*, ed. Hamza Alavi and John Harriss (London: Macmillan, 1989): 222–46.

the youth but reluctance in educating women.[23] This contradiction was resolved through the discursive presence of 'reformed' mothers and daughters who served this agenda and were elevated against and separated from the subalterns and traditional womenfolk of the household.[24] The same salaried middle class was also to champion the cause of religious revivalism in its middle-class reformist form as Deobandi Islam,which attempted to separate and purge the popular form of ritualistic Islam and language into a financially more viable form of personal reformist piety that also supported social distinction while mobilising the lower castes and classes in the name of the Muslim community, and subsequently the nation-state.[25] This religious and social reform also had a gendered literary dimension marked in the movement to transform 'decadent' Urdu from its transgressive, courtesan, subaltern and homo-erotic features to a more standardised 'natural' and, one may add, 'masculine' form. This was a legacy that was inherited and, ironically, carried forward by the movement for progressive literature in colonial and post-colonial South Asia.[26] Language and literary reformism, I argue, was not just the medium but precisely the location of this project of recasting women, as well as men, alongside policing other performative transgressive speech subjectivities. Moreover, language reformism also marks the moment of highlighting and therefore defining its 'other', and, in the process, bringing to light the forbidden aspects of language. Reformists are thus also marked by their own failure in that they make visible the forms that they desire to erase. Therefore, reformism marks not the end but the emergence of both the women and the queer question in South Asia. The seductive threat and allure of the linguistic and cultural 'other' are visible in the detailed description and resultant reification of Begumati Zaban and Rekhti speech as feminine vernacular knowledge within the male canonical Urdu reformist literature.[27] This paper situates this dual historical legacy of Urdu language reform by tracing the persistence and reappearance of transgressive speech in contemporary Urdu public culture, especially in Urdu television dramas. It also makes a case for taking seriously the camp sensibility of the Urdu language in contemporary Pakistan.[28]

The linear history of the *ashraf* turned into a Muslim middle-class identity concludes with its triumph in the achievement of the Muslim homeland in 1947. Did it herald the victory of Muslim middle-class norms and leadership? What happened to the idealised spaces for growing up that were cordoned off in middle-class Muslim households in Pakistan? Did the questions of class and ethnicity disrupt or consolidate middle-class respectability or expose its internal contradictions once the alleged threat of the Hindu/Hindi/Hindustan assumed a new shape in the fellow members of the Muslim community (*umma)* in Pakistan who spoke languages other than Urdu

23. Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
24. Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
25. Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).
26. For a nuanced and critical reading of Urdu literary reformism, see Shad Naved, 'Erotic Conceit: History, Sexuality and the Urdu Ghazal' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 2012).
27. Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
28. Iftikhar Dadi, 'Envisioning the Popular', *artnow* (December 2013): 1–4.

(such as Punjabi, Bengali, Sindhi, Pashto and Balochi)?[29] This article attempts to map the Urdu-speaking middle-class migrant household in its new location in Pakistan to explore the nature of class, caste, language and gender politics. It does so by observing the anxiety over the possible collapse of the reformed household, on which the Muslim community and nation were built. Further, it aims to bring to light the other subjects often written as the recipients of Muslim reformism (that is, women, youth, servants, courtesans and other transgressive subjects) as the counter-publics of Muslim middle-class culture and embodiments of the contradictions of middle-class respectability. It does so by bringing into focus two Pakistani television Urdu dramas, divided by time but united in their anxiety over and pleasure afforded by the immanent contradictions of respectability that are transposed onto the speech of unemployed men, assertive women and eloquent servants assembled in the household.

While this article focuses on the issue of national, household, gender and language politics on TV, it is important to also remember the cinematic satirical legacy of comedian Rangeela and his film, *Aurat Raj* (*Women's Rule*).[30] Indeed, Rangeela is a constant frame of reference in Urdu public culture in Pakistan. His gender-bending and the aforementioned feminist film were not successful in the repressive environment of the 1970s, but the film continues to be a cult classic and a model for satirical subversive comedy. The theme of women's rule and the decline of men's power is a shared terrain of the two dramas discussed in the next section.

Aangan Terha (Crooked Courtyard)

Avid viewers of Pakistani dramas may remember the scandal and joy generated by the Urdu drama, *Aangan Terha* (*Crooked Courtyard*), written by Anwar Maqsood and directed by Qaiser Farooq, and broadcast on the government-run Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) channel in late 1984 (and now available globally on YouTube). The latter mode of dissemination has broadened its audience and reach. More recently, viewers on both sides of the Pakistan and Indian political border, as well in the global diaspora, have laughed heartily watching the drama *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah* (*The Widow of Mr. Quddusi*), written by Faseeh Bari Khan and directed by Mazhar Moin, and telecast on a global private satellite channel, ARY Digital, in 2012. There exist various writings on the history and politics of television drama viewership in Pakistan. While these writings are useful to document the rise of television dramas and their social impact, very little attention has been paid to the issue of Urdu dramas and language and their connection with earlier oral, textual, theatrical, radio and other performative genres, especially in the making of modern television dramas and contemporary Urdu public culture. The task remains to connect these histories of the language and cultural politics of modern television dramas. In this article, the aim is to contextualise and connect the emergence of Muslim social reform in late

29. Ammara Maqsood, *The New Pakistani Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
30. Shehram Mokhtar, 'Aurat Raj: Hacking Masculinity and Reimagining Gender in South Asian Cinema', *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 13 (May 2018), accessed August 11, 2017, 10.5399/uo/ada.2018.13.2.

nineteenth century India with the language reform question and trace its post-colonial legacies and shifting trajectories in contemporary public culture in Pakistan. The article does so by focusing on these two dramas that reveal the connection between social and language questions and the reconstitution of middle-class respectability. The genre of Urdu TV dramas is a particularly useful archive to explore these connections as the dramas are consumed within the domestic space of the household. Indeed, it is the very domestic private and, therefore, also potentially transgressive space, that is central to these dramas. The microcosm of the household offers a crucible in which inflammatory questions on language, gender and authority can be contained and that threatens to implode national discourses.

While temporally divided, the two dramas represent the persistence of the discourse about what it means to be—or, rather, failing to become—Urdu-speaking gentlefolk in contemporary Pakistan. In *Aangan Terha,* the *aangan* (enclosed space adjoining a house; courtyard) is the main discursive, physical, cultural and dramatic arena to map the crisis of middle-class respectability under the ascendency of military dictatorship, which enforces an enhanced religious and cultural censorship under General Zia-ul-Haq's political dictatorship (1977–88).[31] The politically authoritarian and religiously conservative military regime came down heavily on artists, especially musicians, dancers and other subaltern queer subjects, who survived the Partition. In *Aangan Terha*, this subjectivity is represented by the flamboyantly campy artist (*fankar*) Akbar, who is denied the state patronage of the arts academy and forced to seek refuge as a domestic servant. Akbar—our artist-servant character—loses his art academy job and enters the respectable but impoverished household of honest salariat-class gentry, represented by the lead character, Mehboob Ahmed, who is a retired government official, and his assertive wife, Jahanara Begum. Both disenfranchised men have been impelled to return to the interiority of the household, which turns into a competing arena for middle-class men, women and other subaltern queer subjects, transforming the ideal heteronormative home into a queer household, and thereby enacting the contradictions of the Muslim middle class in the new Islamic homeland. Other actors who enter the household are the ethnically diverse neighbours and tenants representing the intrusion and collision of other vernacular languages, cultures and norms, notably Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi, while also representing the failure of the muhajir men in the outer milieu of service and politics.[32] The colonial-era Hindi-Urdu or Hindu-Muslim language politics in North India was replaced by Urdu-Punjabi language and power politics between the Urdu- and Punjabi-speaking Muslim elite in post-colonial Pakistan after the arrival of the muhajirs and the adoption of Urdu as the national language. Scholars have noted the shared social space of Persian and Punjabi in pre-colonial and even colonial-era Punjab.[33] It seems to me that Punjabi was recast in post-colonial Pakistan. While a

31. Khadija Mastoor, *Aangan* (*The Women's Courtyard*), trans. Daisy Rockwell (New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 2018).
32. Ziauddin Sardar, 'Dilip Kumar Made Me Do It', in *A Person of Pakistani Origins* (London: Hurst, 2018): 89–169.
33. On the intimate and complex relationship between the Persian, Urdu and Punjabi languages and literature in colonial Punjab, see Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010). On the post-colonial trajectory of Punjabi in India and Pakistan, see Alyssa Ayres, 'Language, the Nation, and Symbolic Capital: The Case of Punjab', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 3 (2008): 917–46.

Punjabi-speaking landed elite occupied land and political power, the intellectual and cultural capital was taken over by the Urdu-speaking middle-class elite. It is not surprising, therefore, that Punjabi is often represented as rural and uncultured while Urdu was recast as the language of the educated and urban. Although Urdu never occupied a hegemonic position in post-colonial Pakistan, the non-Urdu-speaking elites had to respond to Urdu as the new language of governance, power and respectability. A comparative study of Hindi-Urdu and Punjabi-Urdu remains to be done, but it is fascinating how Urdu had two varying trajectories—as a minority language in India and a majoritarian national language in post-Partition Pakistan. This created a variety of responses to Urdu in post-colonial language politics.[34] These two dramas in some way capture the question of political, cultural and language power being played out in the households of Pakistan. Moving beyond a literary and historical study of the Urdu language, the two dramas also provide an affective archive of language and cultural questions in two historical moments under the repressive religious military Zia regime and the repressive liberal military regime of General Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan.

The middle-class men stand no chance with their respectability in a world marked by moral and political corruption. The internal contradiction of this middle-class respectability is critiqued through its own career, that is, the artist figure who hitherto stayed outside—either in the form of the courtesan or as the homosexual lover—but now enters the household, albeit as a servant, blurring the boundaries between the subversive and the conventional and between the subaltern and the elite. The subversive sexuality is indexed not through sexual behaviour but through the flamboyant speech of the artist-servant who regularly makes fun of the feeble moorings of the heterosexual household, noticeable by the lack of property and progeny. The household relies on the unpaid services of the servant for its own survival. The Urdu language here serves both in its reformist manner and its pleasurable anti-normative role, as displayed in the vocal duel between the eloquent women and the campy male servant, who now becomes a source of traditional language knowledge for the Urdu speakers, who are increasingly divested of linguistic-cultural capital in a Punjabi-dominated multilingual nation-state. The middle-class men exercise agency, not through their speech but their silences and strategic one-liners, marking the arrival of restrained Urdu as the language of middle-class men amidst the cacophony generated by noisy women, servants and non-Urdu speaking ethnic neighbours and tenants, none of whom seem to have the faculty of keeping quiet. Even in silence, the middle-class man exercises agency but does not let go of any chance to use Urdu wordplay. Camp Urdu, with its double meanings and irony, emerges as a language of both entertainment and social critique. We see this, for example, when the flamboyant dancer-servant Akbar (Figure 1) corrects his master Mehboob Sahab's Urdu election speech and explains the Urdu wordplay on *ummeed se hona*, which means being pregnant, as opposed to *ummeed karna*, which means being hopeful (in this case of winning the election). The character of Akbar not only provides comedic relief but also satire based on the choreography of Urdu wordplay.

34. On language politics in Pakistan, see Tariq Rahman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

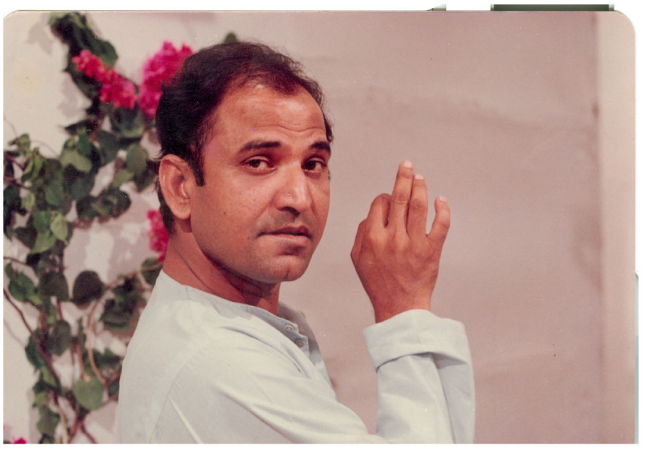

Figure 1. Saleem Nasir as Akbar in *Aangan Terha*. Photograph courtesy of The Citizens Archive of Pakistan.

Figure 2. Hina Dilpazeer as Shakooran in *Quddusi Sahab Ki Bewah*. Photograph courtesy of Faseeh Bari Khan.

The arrival of unemployed male figures in various episodes—whether as a failed poet, a struggling journalist or, eventually in the final episode, a young thief—within the household symbolises the failure of promises made in the new Muslim homeland. Meanwhile, the Punjabi landlord, Chaudhary Sahab, and other corrupt men make both economic and political gains in the new Muslim homeland. The decline of the idealised moral order marked by Urdu-speaking middle-class leadership and authority over lower castes and classes is now mapped onto the other ethnicities which are

rendered culturally and intellectually backward based on their lack of Urdu language and associated cultural capital, even when they make political and economic gains. The failure of the muhajir middle-class household to reproduce itself socially and culturally is highlighted and resolved through the very reformist climax scene, where the *sharif* couple adopt the young thief, boding a reformed future. The promise of social reformism comes to the rescue of the Urdu-speaking middle class to secure a moral victory in the end amidst looming political censorship and the resultant loss of cultural power and abrupt ending of the drama.

The drama has been recently revived as a theatre play and was well received by a new middle-class interest in old-style Urdu plays performed on stage. As a critic has pointed out, *Aangan Terha*, in both forms, remains a 'meditation on the very cultural milieu that gave birth to Anwar Maqsood'.[35] However, it is not the character of the master but the character of the servant that is crucial to understanding the role of language and art in this Urdu public culture. The reviewer also noted about the language qualities: 'it's a display of the unique witticism of Urdu, its toilet humour and sexual innuendos, its people falling and flailing; it's about funny accents and turns of speech'.[36] Noticeably, despite its reformist moral themes of correct behaviour and social norms, what lasts is the subversive counter-public culture embodied in the subaltern camp sensibility of Urdu. Language, culture, family and the nation unite in this drama and in its enthusiastic reception among successive generations of viewers. The scriptwriter, Anwar Maqsood, belongs to an exemplary middle-class family of Urdu writers and artists. He is the brother of Urdu poetess Zehra Nigah. His own work enshrines exemplary moral characters while revealing the other possibilities of subversion within this middle-class culture. The word *terha* is an interesting word: it can mean crooked, twisted, difficult or queer. It was made famous by the master of courtyard-household storytelling, Ismat Chughtai, whose semi-autobiographical novel is also titled *Crooked Line* (*Terhi Lakeer*).[37] She also remains an exemplary influence on our second playwright, Faseeh Bari Khan, and his courtyard-house drama, *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah* (*The Widow of Mr. Quddusi*).

Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah (The Widow of Mr. Quddusi)

The failure of familial, cultural and political reproduction of power marks the crisis but also possibilities in *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah*. In the twenty-first century, social conditions seem to have changed further for the Urdu-speaking Muslim middle-class family, and this is evident in the emergence of dramas that focus more on the erstwhile middle class and the contemporary lower middle classes, their changing social spaces, speech and subjectivities, and their engagement with the traditional models of culture and language. Indeed, from being the landlord of the courtyard house, the *sharif* but lower middle-class family of *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah* now lives as an

35. Ahmer Naqvi, 'Reviving *Aangan Terha*: What the Stage Revival of Anwar Maqsood's PTV Classic Tells Us about a Changing Society and a Timeless Artist', *The Twilight Zone*, October 21, 2014, accessed August 11, 2017, https://medium.com/@karachikhatmal/reviving-aangan-terha-9b3565d8eba1.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Ismat Chughtai, *Tehri Lakeer* (*The Crooked Line*), trans. Tahira Naqvi (New York: The Feminist Press, 2006).

illegal occupant of their Bihari landlord's house. The language and social conflict of the household provide the main arena and plot of the drama.

The intensity of the household crisis in *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah* is enhanced by the death of the male patriarch. The drama is centred on the theme of an Urdu-speaking respectable household, albeit dominated and managed by women—the matriarch Shakooran and her three daughters—so much so that the only biological son, Wudood Ahmad, acquires all the forbidden norms, practices, emotions and subjectivity, and even speech, of the women. The worst crisis for the household is manifested in the recurring nightmare of Shakooran and Wudood where he turns into a bald bride (*ganji dulhan*). In fact, the drama in its prior telefilm incarnation was called *Raunaq Jehan ka Nafsiyati Gharana* (*The Madhouse of Raunaq Jehan*). *Nafsiyati* stands for a melodramatic excess of emotions that teeters into madness, creating a socially disruptive household. This melodramatic household is inhabited by a powerful matriarch, effeminate men and transgender servants, highlighting the anxieties of moral corruption under women's excessive influence but also revealing the possibility of new forms of pleasures and subjectivities produced within a middle-class household without a patriarch.[38]

The household remains the arena of conflict as it is now shared with others. While in *Aangan Terha*, the Urdu-speaking middle-class couple owned the household and had a subtenant, in *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah*, the Urdu-speaking family matriarch Shakooran has illegally occupied a courtyard house and lives there with her three daughters, Badriqa Jahan, Khajista Jahan and Shagufta Jahan, and her only son, Wudood Ahmad, along with the Bihari landlord Aleemuddin's family, and his Pashto, Urdu and wannabe-English-speaking daughter-in-law, Rooh Afza. This motley crew marks the reconfiguration of the spatial orders of language, gender and class. The love-hate relationship between the landlord and the tenant also manifests in multiple affairs, marriage, divorce, remarriage and other Muslim marriage and family dramas, heightened during the holy month of Ramzan. The contradictions of Urdu-speaking middle-class respectability are deliciously exposed during the food feuds over fasting and feasting (*sehri* and *iftaari*). These conflicts also provide apt occasions for vocal duels when the matriarch, Shakooran, deploys her Old Delhi-style Begumati Zaban, particularly vernacular proverbs (*muhavare*), with great effect.[39] In a marriage proposal scene, she suspects the respectable (*ashraf*) origins of a prospective groom and his family—their lack of Urdu pronunciation and use of English and Hindi vocabulary immediately makes Shakooran suspicious: she asks them in which Urdu dictionary they had read a word they had uttered. Apparently, this insistence on correct vocabulary and pronunciation is the basis of selection/acceptance or rejection of a marriage proposal. Indeed, Shakooran suspects the groom's family to be of an illiterate, lower class and caste origin, and potentially of Hindu pasts, due to their hybrid use of the Hindi-Urdu language and the groom's love of Indian TV channels. She

38. Rakshanda Mujeeb, '*Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah* Will Have You in Fits of Laughter', *The Express Tribune Blogs*, April 7, 2013, accessed August 11, 2017, https://tribune.com.pk/article/16798/quddusi-sahab-ki-bewah-will-have-you-in-fits-of-laughter.

39. See Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's important philological work, *Dilli ki Khavatin ki Kahavaten aur Muhavare* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

lampoons them with one of her *muhavaras*, which she uses in a verbal attack on the groom's family: '*J anam ke andhe aur naam nain-sukh* (Born blind and named comfort of eye)'.

This Hindustani vernacular proverb uttered by Shakooran is used to target the suspect origin and genealogies and fallen conditions of respectable Muslim families in Pakistan. This is, in fact, a shared NorthIndian vernacular proverb using both Hindi and Urdu words. One reviewer commented about the usage of Urdu and called it '"*saqeel*" (difficult) Urdu, which represented the simplicity and modesty of Pakistani culture'.[40] There are multiple variants of Urdu on display here. But it is the old Begumati Zaban, now seen as authentic Urdu language, that draws attention. Interestingly, the language and social reformers in colonial India considered Begumati Zaban to be full of vernacular influences that needed to be purged for a respectable form of Urdu to emerge. The drama also exhibits Punjabi, Pashto, Bihari, Bengali, Bambaiyya, Hijra Farsi and subaltern Urdu through multiple characters played to great effect by the actress Hina Dilpazeer. English remains the desired elite language, consistently attempted by Rooh Afza, the character apparently educated at Sir Syed College, Nazimabad, who provides comic relief in her failure to be proficient in it.

Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah is not only centred on the issues of language and ethnicity but also parses the categories of caste, class and the performative nature of *sharif* discourse and identity. The neighbours here are not Punjabis but Biharis and lower-caste entrants who are all claiming respectable genealogy. Indeed, the main household's own genealogy and credentials of belonging to Old Delhi are suspected continuously. The other households in which efforts to build matrimonial alliances are attempted by Shakooran in order to biologically continue the family of Quddusi Sahab, while also maintaining the cultural capital of Urdu-speaking Muslim middle-class identity, are highlighted in her insistence on finding a matching family (*hampala khandan*) with origins in Old Delhi for the alliance. The matrimonial matchmaking game is used nicely to map the ethnically and linguistically divided social milieu of contemporary Karachi from the Nazimabad, Defence and Clifton neighbourhoods to the subversive, mixed, lower middle-class and poor neighbourhoods of Orangi Town, Bihar Colony, Machhar Colony, Musa Colony, Sakkar, Katona, Lalu Khet, Burns Road, Ranchor Lane and the infamous Napier Road with its dancing girls and prostitutes.[41] It is from these neighbourhoods that the subversive characters of a courtesan/*filmi* dancer masquerading as another respectable widow (*bewah*) with young daughters enters the middle-class neighbourhood. Also appearing in the respectable household as a servant is the socially disruptive transgender (*hijra*) character, Illaichi—a major sub-theme of the drama.[42]

The scriptwriter, Faseeh Bari Khan, holder of a Master's degree in Urdu literature, is an Urdu-speaking scriptwriter who credits his experiences of growing up in the

40. *Ibid.*
41. Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014).
42. Rakshanda Mujeeb, 'Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah Will Have You in Fits of Laughter', The Express Tribune Blogs, April 7, 2013, accessed August 11, 2017, https://tribune.com.pk/article/16798/quddusi-sahab-ki-bewah-will-have-you-in-fits-of-laughter.

muhajir neighbourhood of Nazimabad, Karachi, as the decisive influence on his imagination. In terms of genre, he cites the popular radio show *Hamid Mian ke Haan*, scripted by the famous muhajir Urdu writer Intizar Husain, as his inspiration, and acknowledges the influence of *Tilism-e-Hoshruba* and Mir Amman's *Bagh-o-Bahar* traditions on his writing. Khan had also worked as a writer for women's digests and journals for years and derived information and inspiration from the private anxieties and aspirations articulated in Urdu women's magazines. Interestingly, many of the contemporary leading women drama and digest writers, notably the canonical and highly influential Umera Ahmed, follow the male reformist model of Nazir Ahmed and Ashfaq Ahmed's stories in their Urdu dramas.[43] Khan, on the other hand, turns to the tradition of the household stories model of Ismat Chughtai, representing a whole set of forbidden but pleasurable themes that are the subtexts of a Muslim middle-class household.[44] Indeed, Ismat Chughtai is referenced continuously through *Quddusi Saheb ki Bewah* as a source of subversive but pleasurable literature that is equally feared and loved, while Bano Qudsia's mystical novels are referenced but also critiqued for their performative garb of piety.[45]

In a telephone interview with me, Khan made a distinction and emphasised that while he was influenced by the fine literary and dramatic use of Urdu words in Bano Qudsia's novels and dramas, he also fundamentally disagreed with her gender and religious politics. Indeed, many of the leading Urdu drama writers attempt to recreate Bano Qudsia's language, religion and gender ideology. The notable exception is Bee Gul. She represents a new women writer's perspective in the Pakistan TV drama industry dominated by women digest and scriptwriters. During a Skype interview, Gul told me that it is hard to miss the influence of Bano Qudsia on the generation that grew up under the Zia-ul-Haq regime. Like Faseeh Bari Khan, she maintains a literary admiration but also political difference from Bano Qudsia and Ashfaq Ahmed's legacy in TV dramas. However, the elite, educated, reformist, mystical Islam of Bano Qudsia has been rearticulated in the language of the lower middle class, religious ethics and modern self-making by the bestselling Urdu novel writer turned scriptwriter Umera Ahmed, who brings together these complex aspirations in her writings and dramas, particularly *Humsafar* (*Fellow Traveller*) and *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* (*Life is a Rose Garden*), to critique the 'moral decadence' and alleged lack of religiosity of Pakistani elites. Based on my interviews with Faseeh Bari Khan and Bee Gul, and a broader reading of the nature of drama produced in contemporary Pakistan, it seems to me that the Qudsia model of moral writing allows women to participate in the patriarchal TV industry and the wider public culture that the Chughtai model of scandalous writing does not, given the censored histories of such

43. Shuchi Kothari, 'From Genre to Zanaana: Urdu Television Drama Serials and Women's Culture in Pakistan', *Contemporary South Asia* 14, no. 3 (2005): 511–31; Amina Yaqin, 'Framing Women: Tradition and Modernity in Popular Pakistani TV Drama', *The Equator Line* 4, no. 4 (2016): 58–69; Elliot Montpellier, '*Mirāt ul-'Urūs* on the Small Screen: Family TV Dramas and the Making of Pious Publics in Pakistan', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 145–63.
44. Fouzia Nasir Ahmad, 'The First Person: The World According to Bari', *Dawn*, May 18, 2014, accessed August 1, 2020, https://www.dawn.com/news/1106520.
45. Masood Ashraf Raja, 'The King Buzzard: Bano Qudsia's Postnational Allegory and the Nation-State', *Mosaic* (March 2007): 96–109; Taha Kazmi, 'Religious Television and Contesting Piety in Karachi, Pakistan', *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 3 (2018): 523–34.

an articulation. Even Chughtai could not escape censorship despite her multilayered writing. Thus, it is both a class and gender question that is being resolved through the symbolic role of Islam, ethics and piety. Faseeh Bari Khan has consistently refused to take this easy way out. He lampoons both the progressive elite bias and the hypocrisy of lower middle-class Islamic moral authority claims. This is a risky thing to do in the politicised religious climate of Pakistan, and the cumulative effect of it is that Khan had to struggle to get his work accepted by big production houses because of his 'bold themes' and social critiques in dramas. His new independent YouTube production house is therefore ironically named *Kabaarr Khana*, or garbage house. However, his dramas have acquired a cult transnational appeal due to the unique and critical voice that he represents in contemporary Pakistani culture.

In *Quddusi Sahab Ki Bewah*, contemporary women digest and drama scriptwriters and digest-addicted readers and audiences are taken to task for the predictable plots that feature women being beaten and sobbing through trials and tribulations.[46] The legacy of the Urdu poetess Parvin Shakir is the other major female reference in the drama. Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed's feminist poetry is engaged with but also critiqued for failing to reach and appeal to mass melodramatic emotions.[47] This may seem like a literary culture debate, but whom you read in Urdu reveals a lot about class and gender politics on women's and sexual minority rights in contemporary Pakistan, which has split the country's already fragmented public culture.[48]

Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah raised many fundamental questions about contemporary Pakistani public cultures differentiated by class, caste, ethnicity, gender and linguistic hierarchies. Indeed, this is one of the few dramas that break away from the middle-class drama's theme of moral excellence and female misery, represented by the melodrama of digest writers who also dominate the Pakistani drama industry.[49] The other aspect skilfully employed by Khan is the Begumati Zaban spoken by the matriarch Shakooran, as well as the camp vocal masquerade used by the effeminate (*zenana*) son. He also introduces the hilariously riotous Hijra Farsi *zaban* spoken by the subaltern transgender character of Illaichi. Hijra Farsi is a language that circulates among the transgender community of the Hijra and Khwaja Sira in India and Pakistan. Here language performs identity and not the bodily transgender reality, so much so that observers working with these communities have suggested that '[b]eing hijra is speaking this language'.[50] Marginal to mainstream Urdu, it is a key identity marker among the community of speakers.[51] Faseeh Bari Khan's innovation lies in bringing this subversive underground and street language to the respectable middle-class household. In one of the vocal duels between the Begumati Zaban embodiment Shakooran and

46. Faseeh Bari Khan, interviewed by author, October 15, 2021; Bee Gul, interviewed by author, September 15, 2021.
47. Ruksana Ahmad, ed., *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry* (Lahore: The Women's Press, 1990).
48. Zuneera Shah, 'Why the Aurat March is a Revolutionary Feat for Pakistan', Dawn.com, March 17, 2018, accessed October 31, 2021, https://www.dawn.com/news/1394385.
49. Kiran Nazir Ahmed, *Stories with Oil Stains: The World of Women 'Digest' Writers in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020).
50. Zehra Rehman, 'South Asia's Transgender Hijra Community Speaks Its Own Language', *Muftah*, March 30, 2016, accessed August 1, 2020, https://muftah.org/pakistan-india-bangladesh-hijra-farsi/#.Yb5ggi-B1QI.
51. Anahita Mukherji, 'Hijra Farsi: Secret Language Knits Community', *The Times of India*, October 7, 2013, accessed August 1, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/hijra-farsi-secret-language-knits-community/articleshow/23618092.cms.

the Hijra Farsi speaker Illaichi, the former interrogates Illaichi about her knowledge of the Urdu language. The point that emerges is that Begumati Zaban and Hijra Farsi both represent an organic rooted vernacular register of Urdu. Indeed, Shakooran acknowledges the adjacent, often mixed, worlds of the Begumat and the Hijra community in Old Delhi. However, the Hijra Farsi *zaban* depicted in the drama is not reified and also carries the historically changing and contemporary realities of Pakistan with words like *beela* (a lumpen and often criminal lover), *tapad dasi* (rich lover), *giriya* (partner) as well as *moorat* (feminine) and other related words for diverse identities within the vibrant but also deeply violent world of Karachi's political and sexual culture navigated by the transgender community.[52] The drama does not fetishise this language as a secret or high register of a community; instead, it normalises it by talking about its post-colonial changes embedded in the Pakistani economy and society. Both Begumati Zaban and Hijra Farsi appear connected in the undivided linguistic landscape that connects Old Delhi with contemporary Karachi.

Similarly, the linguistic diversity of Pashto is represented by the Pashto B-grade film producer's daughter Rooh Afza and her Lahori Punjabi-speaking mother, which, in turn, is matched by the Bihari in-laws and the magic-practising Bangali *baji* to whom all women in distress turn for revenge black magic (*Bangali jadoo*). Leaving the stereotypes aside, in the process, we also encounter some great Bengali language and cultural references and icons like Runa Laila who was a successful Bengali-Urdu singer in Pakistan before the split of 1971. In all of this, English is seen as a class language rather than a marker of ethnicity; it is therefore claimed by everyone with hilarious results.

Khan draws on the longer tradition of the Begumati and Hijra Farsi *zaban*, and, in the process, transforms them for riotous camp comedy and social critique of class, spatial, language and gender hierarchies in contemporary Pakistan. His Urdu drama language also incorporates and highlights post-colonial cultural references, idioms and icons. Modern women's literature and poetry, particularly of Parvin Shakir, and references to Bano Qudsia as well as Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed are invoked continuously by the lovelorn character of Badriqa Jahan. Famous ghazal singers ranging from Noor Jahan and Naheed Akhtar to Runa Laila are always plugged into the drama soundscapes. Accompanied by frequent dancing sequences that invoke the cinematic legacy of Sangeeta, Monalisa and Reema, the show brings Urdu in dialogue with Punjabi and Bengali,the Pashto B-grade films of Musarrat Shaheen or the popular *mujra* video culture of Anjuman Shahzadi.[53]

Interestingly, the legendary Hindi song, '*Ek Chatur Naar* (A Cunning Woman)', is the title track and recurring background song of the drama. The influence of Hindi films and Indian dramas are not to be missed, especially the reference to *sitara* or Star Plus dramas of Indian satellite television available and consumed

52. On the complex sexual and political space of the Khwaja Sira community and the Beelas' violence in Karachi, see Aamir Majeed, 'A Night of Beela-Moorat Violence in Karachi's Khwajasira World: Birthday Party Opens Risk of Gang Rape for Guests', *Samaa*, September 23, 2021,accessed March 23, 2023, https://www.samaa.tv/news/2021/09/a-night-of-beela-moorat-violence-in-karachis-trans-world/.
53. Saad Khan, 'Pakistani Commercial Mujra: The Working-Class Women of Pakistani Lowbrow Entertainment', *Medium*, June 4, 2017, accessed August 1, 2020, https://medium.com/@khajistan/showgirlsofpakistan-e015b7926105.

religiously by the drama-hungry Pakistani audience. The old Bombay (now Mumbai) films of Dilip Kumar, Nimmi and Madhubala are the cultural references of Shakooran's continued bond with the country left behind. At the same time, the new generation is obsessed with the latest Bollywood releases of Ranbir Kapoor and Ranveer Singh. The usage of Hindi is also pervasive and often referred to as a process of Hinduisation in Pakistan carried out by India through its television dramas. The discourse of Hinduisation and vulgarity are often mixed but precisely marks the allure of Indian popular culture in Pakistan. Turkish dramas are also a looming presence yet condemned for their bold and modern themes.[54] Thus, post-colonial Pakistani national language and public culture are constantly reshaped but also remain in conflict with multiple popular culture reference points across national and language borders.

The usage of a camp register in Urdu is also evident in the extremely successful television talk show, *Late Night Show with Begum Nawazish Ali*, in which Salim Ali does a drag performance as Begum Nawazish Ali.[55] The highly popular show ran successfully on the satellite channel Aaj TV from 2005 to 2007 before it was cut short for its political rather than its sexually subversive speech performance. Ali plays a widow of an army officer and creates a new kind of Begumati Zaban blended with English, which acquires both its flirtatious sexual humour as well as sharp political commentary from the Urdu vocabulary, creating a hybrid Urdu-English and a creative response evoked by the constrained nature of public culture in Pakistan.

Women and other subaltern subjects often provide the language for the emergence of a new discourse and politics around sexuality and other forbidden issues that enmesh social and political critique. However, the new millennial generation of Pakistanis is more linguistically hybrid in developing innovative gender-bending social media characters, such as Shumaila Bhatti played by Mohammed Moiz and using English, Punjabi, Hindi, Pashto, Hindko and Saraiki. Phudina Chutni, a risqué, double entendre drag character also developed by Moiz, borrows from the earthy and bawdy humour of Punjabi as well as Urdu and English in a very interesting way.[56] The point is that in the realm of language, comedy and satire, Urdu and other vernacular registers of South Asian languages often provide far more interesting hybrid possibilities. Despite the consistent history of censorship, there remain many dramatic histories available in plain sight on the television set and increasingly now on YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok.

Conclusion

The recent books by Maryam Wasif Khan and S. Akbar Zaidi are important interventions as they attempt to grapple and connect the emergence of the debate about 'Who is a Muslim' to the 'Making of a Muslim', from colonial North India to

54. Abdul Rehman Madani, 'Gender Interaction Pattern on Private Television Channels: Turkish and Pakistani Dramas and Viewers' Perception', *Asian Journal of Empirical Research* 4, no. 3 (2014): 172–79.
55. Mobina Hashmi, 'At the Limits of Discourse: Political Talk in Drag on *Late Night Show with Begum Nawazish Ali*', *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 4 (2012): 511–31.
56. Shahjehan Saleem, 'Gender Benders and All That Drag', *The News International*, accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/instep-today/437577-gender-benders-and-all-that-drag.

contemporary Pakistan.[57] While Zaidi focuses on the historical emergence of this debate in colonial India, Khan also studies the genealogies and trajectories in literary print archives into the contemporary televisual culture. She focusses on Umera Ahmed's popular writings and dramas as central in the remaking of contemporary Muslim subjectivity in Pakistan. The focus on intersections of Islam and Urdu language and literature is much needed in the scholarship on the post-colonial Pakistani state and culture. However, a narrow focus on the dominant religious themes in print and televisual culture gives a limited impression about the historic role and nature of Urdu TV dramas in Pakistan. Islam and piety cannot fully explain the subversive subtext of the genre of TV dramas; it needs to be analysed in a dialectical relationship with class, caste, gender, sexual and language politics. It is also important to explore how Islam operates not as a monolithic structure but as a symbol of the wider moral and affective economy in which subjectivity and collective psychosocial issues are being negotiated in everyday histories.[58] Television dramas provide the rich affective archives of desires, emotions and the unconscious to explore these questions in contemporary Pakistan and South Asia.[59] Moving beyond an assumed centrality of Islam and nationalism, this article has provided an alternative reading of who is a *sharif* Muslim in Pakistan through two dramas, both providing a humorous and satirical camp take on a very sensitive and controversial topic. Both dramas were at the receiving end of censorship and counter-critique; however, both not only survived but have also become camp comedy classics.

Much has been written about the bold nature of *Aangan Terha* and *Quddusi Sahab ki Bewah*, evidenced in the way they play with social taboos and expand the categories of topics deemed suitable for representation. Both scriptwriters use extreme cases of the loss of employment of the patriarch or his death as the trigger that disrupts the Muslim middle-class household and social norms. Although both represent subversive gender identities and politics, they should not be read solely through the lens of feminist or queer theory but should also be seen as illustrations of rooted Urdu language and public culture aesthetics. This is because both writers, while venturing into satire and comedy that can accommodate modern realities, remain within the tradition of Urdu storytelling. Yet in doing so, they also reveal the fragile facade of middle-class culture and household, and, by extension, a national culture that is based on hierarchies and regimes of religious power and reformism of speech and behaviour but also leaves room for the pleasure of excess that remains possible within this contradiction of social and language reform. Urdu as a language with its satirical and humorous camp sensibility wonderfully carries these contradictions and possibilities. The house when turned upside down reveals both the threat and the possibilities of such a condition. These dramas, written by two men, represent and critique the

57. S. Akbar Zaidi, *Making a Muslim: Reading Publics and Contesting Identities in Nineteenth-Century North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Maryam Wasif Khan, *Who Is a Muslim? Orientalism and Literary Populisms* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

58. Frud Bezhan and Daud Khattak, 'Pakistan Turns to Urdu Dramas to Fill the Identity "Vacuum"', *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty RFERL*, June 17, 2020, accessed March 23, 2023, https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-turns-to-turkish-tv-drama-to-fill-identity-vacuum-/30676048.html.

59. Ashis Nandy, ed., *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema* (New Delhi: Zed Books, 1999).

inherited contradictions and crises of a respectable masculine patriarchal Muslim household-nation based on the use of religion and nationalism and yet unable to fill the vacuum and desires of its members.

To conclude, the family drama set inside the private domain of the courtyard house is a perfect metaphor for the public arena where the national culture of Pakistan is contested. The historical resources of the Urdu language, bridging humour, wit and social critique, which was used by women poets for the creation of feminist counter-publics, have since found wider circulation through other media in contemporary Pakistan. The decline of the film industry and expansion of cable television channels make Urdu drama the most influential and interesting archive of public culture in contemporary Pakistan. However, just as there is no single Pakistani public, there are diverse public cultures and counter-publics in an Islamic republic riven by class, language and cultural divides. The interplay of these contradictions on the small screen in Pakistani living rooms provides interesting material for the appreciation of the coexistence, however fraught, of these contradictions within plural and contesting Pakistani counter-publics. The transnational circulation of these dramas through YouTube adds another cosmopolitan layer in the (re)making of a (global) Urdu public culture in a country intent on censoring it. Ironically, political repression has been good for the creativity of Urdu in contemporary Pakistan and India.

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